

Cocreating the Kingdom 10-20-24

Job 38:1-7, (34-41)
Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b
Hebrews 5:1-10
Mark 10:35-45

Did you know that 1/3 of the Bible is comprised of poetry? Literally 33% of the Bible comes to us through the artform of poetry. Have you ever thought about the purpose of art? Art is communication that targets the emotions, rather than the intellect. Art exists to express, to convey, rather than just tell us something in a calculatingly rational way. It works on the senses as much as the mind. The art of poetry isn't scientific data, it isn't broken down in formulas like a textbook, it isn't bullet pointed like a rulebook, or linear like an instruction manual. A full third of our sacred scriptures are art. They are a poetic expression of who God is, what God has done, and who we are in response. The fact that God has chosen to be conveyed to us through imprecise, emotive, experiential, and conceptual ways is significant to the way we approach learning about God.

Not all of us are people who naturally appreciate art or poetry. But the fact that art exists, and that God uses it to communicate to us highlights its value for us. God cares about the way we feel. God knows we learn through what we experience. If listening to music, reading poetry, or strolling through an art gallery aren't exciting to you, maybe you enjoy the art of the changing colors of a sunset or the sound of the crashing ocean waves. Wherever you feel yourself stopped by the power of a sensory experience, that's the impact of art. It is the reception of communication, an invitation into learning something.

In today's lessons, we start with poetry from the book of Job. Job was a man who suffered intensely and whose suffering formed **IN** him equally significant questions. Rather than answering those questions, God turns the questioning back around on Job. God's questions weren't intended to be answered. He wasn't being academic. They were intended to prod Job's imagination, to point out how vastly transcendent God's wisdom, power, and protection is, even when Job was feeling most abandoned. God's words

conjure images that makes us feel small in comparison to God's limitlessness, remind us that a God who counts the clouds can clearly count the lives and concerns closest to our hearts, and assure us that the one who provides the nourishment for offspring of wild birds is more than capable of satisfying our needs as well.

Then we hear more lyrical poetry from the Psalmist. This rousing hymn of praise is also designed to inspire the imagination. Rather than detailing God's chronological achievements in the work of creation, it uses imagery to invoke mystery. It constructs, not an image, but a sensory experience of a God who not only builds the world, but then uses it for the purpose of service. God uses creation to communicate. This too is a poetic picture expressing both the majesty and intentional intimacy of God.

You might be thinking that by the time we get to our epistle we will certainly have moved from poetry into the safety of prose, but not so fast. The author of the Hebrews quotes two additional Psalms in his effort to explain the priesthood. Did you catch that? He uses poetry to teach. Once again, this is not a textbook lecture. Not only that, but then he cites the enigmatic Melchizedek. This priest is a literary figure who only appears in one short historical story, for such a brief moment, that in his brevity, he confounds generations of Jewish scholars. You remember Abram? Well, Abram won a battle, rescuing his nephew Lot, and then Melchizedek appeared. No one knew who he was before this, and we have only speculated since. But Melchizedek showed up as a priest, providing bread and wine, the eucharistic elements, then blessed Abram. In return Abram tithed a tenth of his possessions to Melchizedek who vanishes, never to be heard from again. So, let's review. Our dependable epistle highlights a mysterious Old Testament priest who uses pre-Christian eucharistic symbols, is honored as God, and then leaves without explanation.

If you studied poetry in school, you probably remember poetic devices, things like imagery, symbolism, and allegory. So much of what our Bible says and so much of what we do here, in the church building, is a type of artistry. It's designed to evoke and provoke.

Art wants us to feel things deeply enough to be moved by them. We can argue all day about the literal versus figurative nature of the various Bible stories, but in the end, all the authors of Scripture communicated their stories in artistically powerful ways.

The author of Hebrews argues that Melchizedek's story is about the eternal priesthood of Christ on our behalf. But he also explains that in God's kingdom, even Jesus had to LEARN humility through suffering because, unlike human kingdoms, God's kingdom is about sacrificial service. We already saw that in the Hebrew poetry we stated with. God creates and then serves the creation, which then serves God.

As God's people, we are tasked with being image bearers. As God's people, we are invited into participation with God. Servanthood. Like God, we are artists and creators. Like Jesus we are asked to be willing to suffer to protect and sustain the creation. Incidentally, the creation includes the humans, as well as the created world, both animate and inanimate. We are all co-creators with God. And while we typically think that our work is gauged by what we measurably produce, it's not that limited. Our thoughts, our attitudes, and our feelings are all part of what we do in this life, part of our artistry, and part of our work. Our internal life contributes to that which we create and serve. As co-creators in God's kingdom, we bring our whole selves to the task.

So now we have finally made it to our gospel lesson. This actually is a narrative, rather than poetry, but even Jesus' words drip with symbolism. Jesus disciples weren't prepared to drink the cup Jesus' faced, metaphorically speaking. Neither were they prepared to be baptized with Jesus' baptism. For the record, both those allusions point to Jesus coming crucifixion, not water. His words are meant to help his disciples understand that he was willingly accepting his death. He used poetic language to help them feel, in their hearts and bodies, what servanthood was really about.

God is both Creator and servant to the creation. As part of the creation, we are invited to participate with God in this work. We can learn about God through intellectual study. But we should also expect to learn about God through our experiences. You've probably heard it said that people won't remember what you say, but they will remember how you made them feel. Maybe that's why God uses a third of our Scripture to help us feel things that exist beyond the limitations of our academic minds?

Here's the thing, God speaks through art. It's all around us. God's communication is limitless and available to us in any place we open ourselves to experience it. If we feel like God is distant or silent, we are in good company. Job and many of our Psalms were written by people who felt that way. But their example tells us to pause and direct our attention to the artistry and communication of God that exists everywhere. God loves us, God made the world for us and preserves us in it. We are seen by God, loved, and held, even when we don't feel it.

The truth is we are all works of holy art, designed intentionally by God. As God's creation, we are made co-creators. It is within our grasp to be holy artists ourselves, expressing the truth about God, God's nearness and God's love to those who don't see it and can't find a way to experience it. As we tune ourselves to experience the communication of God, we will feel God's nearness, be comforted and inspired, and begin to increasingly convey the Kingdom to others through our service.

May we be a people so impacted by the communication of God, that we are utterly transformed by it. May our transformation inspire us to be co-creators and servants who powerfully communicate God to the world around us.